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Wendy Brady

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Abstract

Kathy wrote, 'After the Olympics, we have a lifetime of memories. Australia is celebrating ... in an unprecedented way'. She continued, 'After the joy, let's not forget the low points of the year,' these included: no apology from the Howard government to the Stolen Generations; the report from the United Nations Committee for the elimination of Racial Discrimination; mandatory sentencing; the state of Aboriginal health; and the failure of the federal government to sign the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women'. It is not THE Cathy,¹ but Kathy Malera Bandjalan(g)² editor of the Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal. Freeman, she noted, demonstrated the dignity, beliefs and strengths of Aboriginal society in being able to survive against the odds (2). And pretty good too for a people who, according to the Minister for Reconciliation, 'didn't have chariots, I don't think they invented the wheel' {Koori Mail 2}.

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Catherine did not run for Reconciliation, she ran because that's what she does. The majority of Aboriginal Australians who made their views public expressed support for Catherine as well as for the other Indigenous Olympians, like Nova Peris Kneebone, Patrick Johnson, Kyle Vander-Kuyp. From the Opening to the Closing Ceremony the majority of people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who engaged with the 'Oi-Oi-Oi' feeling of the Olympics, behaved as if Australia had every chance to reconcile its past and present relationship to Indigenous nations.

Reconciliation is a government policy which was initiated under the former federal Labor government, and continued under the conservative Coalition government which came to power in the mid 1990s. The Reconciliation process is intended to effect reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians to achieve a more harmonious and cohesive society. The corporate media pushed the Freeman = Reconciliation point. Cathy Freeman was held up by the media as a symbol of the possibility of change and success by Indigenous people. In winning her race she became a sign of the success for the reconciliation process because the majority of Australia's different cultural groups were seen to support her. This media focus created so much pressure that it drained her to a point where she knelt at the end of 'the race' to recover enough energy to

savour her win. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation³ (ABC) was much more contained, with the 'Daily Olympian,' on September 26th reporting after her win 'the Olympian has deliberately said very little about Freeman in the running of this race. We figured the rest of the press was making up for our sins of omission. After last night there is really not a lot more that needs to be said. The run was as emphatic a statement as anyone needed made' (Online).⁴

Was it such an emphatic statement? If so, how does one account for the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protest in Victoria Park in the inner city borough of South Sydney, the state capital?⁵ Or The Mayor of South Sydney threatening the removal of the Tent Embassy.⁶ Or the Government's line being put in a media conference?⁷ This is the same media briefing where the person who had not been invited until the last minute, Geoff Clark, Chairman of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)⁸ spoke up about the realities of Indigenous life in Australia. It appears that Australian society is locked in by the dominant culture view that if one Aboriginal woman runs a race that is 'enough said'.

The media's representation of the Olympics, apart from a few notable exceptions such as Debra Jopson of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, did not come close to an appropriate reflection of Aboriginality or Indigenous life. NBC, the American broadcaster, for example, described Cathy Freeman as an Australian 'Maori'. Maori people are Indigenous people of New Zealand and this illustrated the lack of knowledge of Indigenous Australians by many media organisations and their representatives.

I attended the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games and sat in wonder at the display. But where were we as Indigenous people, except in some stereotypical representation, where a petite blond, non-Indigenous girl was lifted up and portrayed as the typical Australian. The 'kylette'⁹ was surrounded by a mix of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural 'bits and pieces' that locates the majority of Aboriginal people in a past that does not reflect our contemporary way of life or the differences in our lived experience. Neither the greeting by Sydney Aboriginal Land Councils nor the welcoming song by the Aboriginal performer Deborah Cheetham was broadcast. These are recognised representatives of the city's Indigenous communities, but they were not given the international acknowledgement they deserved. The Olympic Games were held on Aboriginal land with which Indigenous people of Sydney have a connection that goes back thousands of years. The international telecast of the Opening Ceremony focused on more generalised and often more non-urbanised notions of Indigenous Australians. Are we not Aboriginal enough to be seen if we live in the city with the largest Indigenous Australian urban population?

Upon leaving the Opening Ceremony with my friends I bumped into a non-Aboriginal man who was involved in the organisation of the Opening Ceremony. He was excited, as we were, and declared what a great success it had been. He asked me what I thought of the participation by Aboriginal women from remote

desert areas in the show. I responded by affirming how it was great to see a group of women who would hold so much traditional knowledge of THEIR community. He interrupted, 'but these are real Aborigines!' I stood mute as he wished us 'Good night. Have a great Olympics'. I looked to one of my kinswomen in the group and any flickering hopes we might have held for change were extinguished. He failed to understand that Aboriginal people who live in urban environments maintain traditional beliefs and practices albeit often invisible to those who do not have a close connection with urban Indigenous communities. Although we may not dress in the same way or have the same skin tones of some of our more remote brothers and sisters it does not mean we are less Aboriginal. It is extremely disturbing for urban Aboriginal people to find racial authenticity being equated only with colour.

Many of the international media however seemed very keen to try to produce an accurate representation of Indigenous Australia. In the Centre where I work we were contacted by journalists (print and electronic) from around the world, Finland, Malaysia, Canada, Japan, USA, United Kingdom, France and so on. Some of the University of New South Wales' Aboriginal Research Centre staff, Katrina Thorpe and Shirley Gilbert, assisted the NBC TV team to correct some interesting errors on their website where Catherine Freeman was described as an Australian Maori. Well, some still believe that all Indigenous people in the Pacific are the same. We answered questions about mandatory sentencing, reconciliation, the stolen generations (with an 's'), health, education, alcoholism, violence, and how we perceive our future. Some of us felt that we were getting another message, with just as much effect, around the globe as, the highly recognised 'burn, baby, burn' statement of the late Kumanjay Perkins.¹⁰ Jenny Pryor, ATSIC Commissioner for North Queensland, said of the Australian media, 'there has never before been such a sustained period of overwhelmingly positive media coverage of and about Indigenous people — as there has been for Sydney and Australia' (Public Address).

It is deeply disturbing that this has not been sustained and that the media strives to find ways to insert a negative image of Aboriginal people. An Aboriginal woman from Brisbane was in the headlines in relation to a criminal matter, not long after the Olympic Games ended, and a reporter announced that a solicitor representing her was from the Aboriginal Legal Service. This is a common ruse by the media to identify Aboriginal people in legal matters, despite codes of behaviour agreed to by various bodies not to racially identify those involved in criminal matters. One does not read or hear statements that a 'white lawyer' is representing 'a white person'. To the rest of the world Australia has the appearance of having run the 'race for Reconciliation' and it was won by one Aboriginal woman, which according to an ABC commentator is 'enough said'. In Garry Linnell's article for the *Good Weekend Magazine*, 'Olympic Souvenir Edition' in October he commented on Catherine Freeman's achievement and recovery from the emotion of the win with: 'Later, there is the medal ceremony and recognition

of how these Games have changed another fact of Australian life. At last, everyone knows the words to the national anthem' (41). Reconciliation was not the success for Linnell: it was the crowd memorising more than the chorus of 'Advance Australia Fair'. Now, Australians do not have to feel ashamed of this strange musical refrain nor their previous inability to recall it.

At the 'Post-Olympics Post-Mortem' discussion hosted by the Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, at the University of Sydney in November 2000, the panelists were asked to comment on the question of whether 'we are mature enough to countenance pride and shame?' My response was that, 'we certainly are!' On the front page of the Aboriginal fortnightly newspaper, the *Koori Mail*, of October 18, the headline read, 'Our mob can do anything!' The lead article was a response to the federal Minister for Reconciliation Philip Ruddock's comments that Aboriginal people 'didn't have chariots, I don't think they invented the wheel' published in a French newspaper. As the Minister responsible for Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australians his statement illustrates the lack of understanding of and failure to wholly engage in cultural change at the level of government. The response on the front page of the *Koori Mail* did not focus on the Olympics. It pointed out that, whether it was lighting the Flame, 'painting an award winning work of art, contesting one of the largest rugby league carnivals in the world, or having the courage to surf the big waves of Margaret River in Western Australia, Indigenous Australians are defying the odds. Despite making up only 2 per cent of the population, our contribution to Australian society is considerable and belies our minority status' (*Koori Mail*). It was a clear statement of pride, but the struggle for Indigenous Australians is about the retention of pride in a society where the dominant culture have institutionalised a process of 'shaming' Indigenous people.

Juan Antonio Samaranch's declaration during his speech at the Closing Ceremony of the Sydney Games, that it was the best Olympic games in modern times, no doubt filled the majority of Australians with pride. It further eroded the 'cultural cringe' which has been so much a part of Australian society and which to my mind had its beginnings in the 'shame' of being part of and descended from a colonising culture. Indigenous Australians feel no shame for being Aboriginal but, through the oppression and violations of basic human rights, often sense the shame of having to live in disadvantaged circumstances. In this we do not suffer a sense of shame rather the reverse. We feel cultural pride. However, we may experience the embarrassment of constantly being put on public display in regard to our lives, our communities and our experiences.

It is still open to debate as to whether the Olympics enabled non-Indigenous people to deal with the shame of colonisation. Peter Garrett, lead singer of the socially conscious band, Midnight Oil, and the group Savage Garden, made public their feelings, while the Indigenous Australian singer Christine Anu and the Indigenous rock music band, Yothu Yindi, added to the significance of this moment

where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian performers showed their support for Reconciliation. Pat Dodson, Aboriginal spokesperson and former head of the Reconciliation Council declared that, 'We can have no more of a schizophrenic national behaviour where the people celebrate our existence, while those who are guided by the political pragmatism of the day deny us the rights to our country and the rights to maintain our spiritual strength' (Online). There was a determination on the part of a large number of Australians to ensure that biases and prejudices and the legacies of colonisation were not a matter of shame in relation to the Olympics. Cheers for the East Timorese contestants was always long and loud, encouragement for teams no matter which country they represented and presenting a 'good face' to visitors were the most obvious efforts on the part of the majority of Australians to show the country was mature. However, that which forms a nation continues to inform the responses of people to difference, whether it is to skin colour, beliefs, cultural expressions or physical factors. While the media may to all appearances have treated Aboriginal issues in relation to the Olympics with more goodwill than is usual, it is for the most part, as my elderly father would say, 'with a backhanded compliment', meaning some of the old responses still surface.

The same can be said of audience responses to Olympic events, whether they were sporting, visual or the performing arts. There are similarities in the way in which readers take up a text, for the competence to comprehend it has to be learnt.

Enculturated ethnic readers who understand the referential world of the narrative may be distanced by the form of the contemporary novel, a genre inscribed with a complex of Western ideas concerning identity, authorship and ways of knowing. Eurocentric readers, on the other hand, often fail to understand either the core experience of the epistemology and subjectivity represented in ethnic and post-colonial fiction.

(Linton 41)

Transferring this analysis to audience responses during the Olympics reveals that most were responding to that which stimulated their sense of having 'settled the past'. For the Olympics is about going beyond the limits and Australian audiences were determined to be the best. Their joy at the Opening and Closing Ceremonies was very real and engaging. However, one can never know how many amongst those many thousands would have subjected themselves to a personal act of reconciling Black and White relations, or of reconciling the past and the present injustices that continue in Australia.

One was never sure of what Linton calls the 'enthusiastic embrace' of the audience to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture during the period of the Olympics. The audience refused to be excluded or left at a distance from the performance. The extent to which all had to be embraced led to Aboriginal society being characterised as that which is understood only through song, storytelling or dance. The present realities of Aboriginal life were removed so as not to undermine the dominant culture's demands of how Aboriginal Australia

was to be seen in that moment. Ultimately this resulted in the Indigenous performance being diluted and (re-)represented so that it became palatable for the audiences, both present and those observing through electronic media. What did contain some acknowledgement of the lived experience of Aboriginal people of Sydney and the realities of our connection with the land was the welcome by representatives of the local Aboriginal Land Councils. However, it was not considered significant enough to be televised. In analysing the Olympics David Williamson came closest to an accurate interpretation of the events.

The truth is that much as it made us feel warm and progressive as we cheered Catherine's victory, we recent Australians have no real right to call her 'our Cathy' or celebrate her victory deliriously as if it were our own. Until we do complete the process of reconciliation, she's nobody's Catherine but her own, her family's and her people's.
(Williamson 15)

The audience cannot 'occupy' (as the land has been occupied) the Indigenous performer whether it is in sports, the arts, or elsewhere because the performer has the right to set boundaries which must not be invaded. The Olympic Games were about overcoming obstacles, endurance, and survival — something that the world's Indigenous peoples have unwanted, but universal experience of.

The moments of the Olympic Games that will stay with me are being seated in the stadium at the Opening Ceremony surrounded by my friends, hearing the cheer for Catherine Freeman as she stepped up to light the flame, seeing the Premier of NSW kneel before Catherine at the Parade of Olympians, and receiving the thanks of a member of the international media for explaining about what my identity, as an Aboriginal person, means to me. The most emotional experience was watching Catherine's race on television at home, jumping up and down to urge her on, cheering at the top of my voice when she won, and hearing my neighbours doing the same. That was truly the best Olympics moment ever for me.

NOTES

- ¹ Cathy (Catherine) Freeman is an Aboriginal Australian athlete who won a Gold medal in the 400 metre women's track event at the Olympic Games held in Sydney, Australia in September 2000. She is the first Aboriginal Australian track athlete to win a Gold medal.
- ² Bandjalan(g) has a bracketed (g) to indicate pronunciation change.
- ³ The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is a federal government funded public broadcasting body.
- ⁴ This website is now closed but was in operation during and post the Sydney Olympic Games. The site closed in early 2001.
- ⁵ The Aboriginal Tent Embassy was first established in the 1970's on the front lawn of the Federal Parliament House. A group of Aboriginal people and their supporters put up tents to protest for Aboriginal land rights. Some of the Aboriginal people who participated in the original Tent Embassy and others decided to engage in a similar form of protest during the year 2000 Olympics to bring attention to human rights and

social justice issues effecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the present. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy (2000) was erected on a public park, which had been an ancient Aboriginal meeting ground. The park is on the main road leading from the city to the Olympic site along which spectators, athletes and Olympic officials travelled during the event. It was a bold statement by Aboriginal people about the state of race relations in Australia.

- 6 The Mayor of the local government authority attempted to invoke state laws to have the protestors removed, however the state government did not support his moves and the Tent Embassy remained for the duration of the Games.
- 7 The federal government attempted to use a media conference with national and international journalists to put their position of Australia's human rights record and how it had supported the Reconciliation process.
- 8 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was established under a former federal Labor government to address Indigenous issues in Australia. It is a mixture of a public service structure that has elected representatives from Indigenous Australian communities who have input into local, state and national concerns of the Commission.
- 9 Kylie Minogue is an icon for contemporary Australian pop music and was one of the main performers at the Opening Ceremony of the Games. She is blond, petite and is considered a model of Australian musical success. The young girl who performed in the Opening Ceremony mirrored the same attributes of Kylie Minogue.
- 10 Kumanjay Charles Perkins, was the first international Aboriginal soccer player, a former senior Aboriginal public servant and an outspoken activist for Aboriginal rights. Prior to the Olympic Games he made a statement which the mass media reported, where he declared that Aboriginal people would stage major protests, including that the city of Sydney would 'burn, baby, burn'. It was more a symbolic threat but one that did gain media attention.

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